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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 011582

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TAGS: PREL MARR ETRD PREF GG RS

SUBJECT: GEORGIA UPDATE: OCTOBER 16

REF: A) ST PETERSBURG 631 B) MOSCOW 11539 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR WILLIAM J. BURNS. Reason 1.4 (b, d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Deportations of undocumented Georgian nationals continue. Round-ups have slowed in Moscow, but picked up in St. Petersburg. Russian and Georgian officials continue to trade insults and veiled threats. Harassment of ethnic Georgians may have peaked thanks to a backlash from Russians of many political persuasions. End Summary.

Deportations

¶2. (C) Georgian Ambassador Chubinishvili confirmed (see Ref. A) October 16 that "about 100" undocumented Georgians are detained in St. Petersburg. The Georgian Embassy has sent a consular officer to help facilitate their departure. Georgians are soliciting funds from relatives of the detainees to pay for the flights. Detentions in Moscow are down, Chubinishvili told us, because undocumented Georgians are "in hiding."

¶3. (U) Interfax reported that, according to the Georgian Embassy in Moscow, about 200 Georgians will be deported from Moscow to Tbilisi on October 17.

Statements

¶4. (U) Russian politicians and officials continue to make statements harshly critical of Georgian President Saakashvili. Federation Council Member Vasiliy Likhachev told the press October 14 that the Saakashvili's statements Georgia should put "his partners in Brussels and the U.S." on guard against the "militarization" of Georgia. CHOD Yury Baluyevskiy, commenting on a statement by Georgian DefMin Okruashvili that Georgia does not fear war with Russia, said October 16 that Russia has no intention of starting a war with Georgia, but that Georgia will bear responsibility for any military confrontations in Abkhazia or South Ossetia.

Ethnic Harassment

¶5. (C) The harassment of ethnic Russians in Georgia -- many of them Russian citizens -- has produced a backlash among some Russians. In Kazan, one Tatar intellectual told us that the "demonization" of Georgians as a people bespeaks a new growth of "Russia for the Russians" ethnocentrism. Russian nationalist commentator Sergey Markedonov posted an article October 13 decrying the harassment campaign, saying the Kremlin was stooping to racist policies. He compared the campaign to the persecution of Volga Germans in 1914-15, and called it a public relations gift to western media eager to defeat Russia in the information war. Markedonov, like other

Russians we have talked with, found the tax harassment of popular Russian writer Boris Akunin (the pen-name of Grigol Chkhartishvili) most offensive. Markedonov dryly pointed out that most Russian teenagers these days get their sense of Russian patriotism from reading Akunin's books. Markedonov also castigated the Kremlin for its irrational, "emotional" and "hysterical" approach to Georgia. Instead of having clear goals in mind when imposing sanctions (such as forcing Georgia to sign a statement on the non-use of force against Abkhazia or South Ossetia), Markedonov charged that Russian policymakers are bogged down in "fear of NATO or Soros."

¶6. (C) The backlash may have further tempered the campaign against ethnic Georgians (which had already caused outrage when a school principal publicly vowed never to comply with the order to give the police school record information on the parents of students with Georgian surnames). At least one major Georgian restaurant in Moscow has reopened after closing down "voluntarily" for a week. We were told of a similar incident in Kazan: inspectors visited the owner of the most popular Georgian restaurant and told him apologetically that they were under orders to find a reason to shut him down. They advised him to shut down voluntarily and wait until it all blew over.

¶7. (C) Sounding a discordant note, Kremlin-connected political analyst Sergey Markov told us that the campaign would continue and that clear instructions had been issued by the authorities to throw the book at Georgian criminal operations and major businesses for violations of laws that will continue to go unenforced against other ethnic groups. Having just returned from a trip to Abkhazia, Markov stressed that Russia's problem was with Saakashvili, not with Georgians, and discounted the possibility of improved

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relations absent a change in Tbilisi of leadership or orientation towards Russia.

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